Special Olympics Families Guide to Sport

Table of Contents

Structure of Special Olympics	2
Rules	3
Sports Offered by Special Olympics	4
Special Olympics Competition	5
Competition Season and Advancement	7
Awards	9
Unified Sports	10
Fitness	11
Family Involvement	11
Navigating the Role of a Special Olympics Sports Family Member	13

1. Structure of Special Olympics

SPECIAL OLYMPICS INTERNATIONAL

- Provides global resources.
- Guides overall strategic direction.
- Accredits National and State level Special Olympics Programs.
- Organizes global events and Games.

SPECIAL OLYMPICS REGION

- Supports implementation of SOI rules & policies regionally.
- Supports development and roll-out of Special Olympics resources.
- Provides support to National and State Programs in the Region.
- Organizes Regional events and Games.

SPECIAL OLYMPICS NATIONAL / STATE PROGRAM

- Organizes national, state, and local events and Games.
- Often is divided into sub-Programs (by province, county, or similar geographic area within Country/State).
- Provides Local Clubs with guidance, support, information, resources, policies, and procedures.

LOCAL PROGRAM/CLUB

- Organizes Special Olympics in a local community.
- Engages athletes, families and siblings, coaches and volunteers.
- Organized according to Accredited Program rules and this guide.

2. Rules

What rules do we use?

Like all sport, Special Olympics sport is governed by sets of rules.
There are 3 types of Special Olympics Rules documents:

The General Rules

Provide rules and guidelines for all Special Olympics activities and connects us to our purpose, mission, goals and founding principles.

Click here to view the Special Olympics General Rules.

The Sports Rules Article 1

This is the central sport rules document. It provides the standards for Special Olympics training and competitions. It covers key topics which apply across all sports as well as standard operating procedures, such as:

- Classification of Sports
- Age Groupings
- Unified Sports
- Codes of Conduct
- Divisioning
- Advancement
- Selection
- Maximum Effort Violation
- Jury/Rules Committees

Click here to view the Special Olympics Sport Rules Article 1.

These are general principles not found in the sport-specific rules. This is essential knowledge for all people involved with Special Olympics sports.

Sport-Specific Rules

Each sport has its own set of rules. Within each sport, a set of Official Special Olympics Sport Rules has been developed. These rules are over seen and maintained by SOI's Sports Rules Advisory committee.

Click here to view the Special Olympics Sport Rules.

TIP

It's a good idea to be familiar with these rules. In most sports, the Special Olympics sports rules have been based upon the International Sport Federation Rules and or National Governing Body (NGB) Rules

but include some modifications. International Sport Federation Rules are the rules that govern mainstream sports globally.

What kind of differences will I see compared to International Sports Federation Rules?

To ensure a safe and dignified competition for all competing Special Olympics athletes, some sport rules and/or events may be modified and/or differ from other sport federations and programs. If you have questions, it is best to talk to the coach about these. They will be able to explain what the differences are and why they exist.

Are the rules the same at local level and World Games?

The official Special Olympics Sports rules apply at all international competitions. At a local level, some sport rules may be modified or differ from Special Olympics International rules. These changes may be designed to encourage wider participation, to meet the specific needs of the athletes in the program, or for logistical reasons such as facility availability.

TIP

Talk with your local coach to learn about local rule variations.

3. Sports Offered at Special Olympics

What Sports are available?

International Level

Special Olympics Sports Rules Article 1 describes how sports are classified in Special Olympics. There is no longer a list of "official sports". Instead, sports that show the highest participation rates may be included in international competitions.

Local Level

At a local level, each Special Olympics program may decide which sports it will offer. Often these decisions are made based on available training facilities, coaches, and the ability to host competitions (which might include competition facilities and sports officials). Some of the most popular sports around the world are:

- Athletics (Track and Field)
- Swimming
- Football (soccer)
- Basketball
- Bocce
- Table Tennis
- Bowling
- Badminton

Globally, the most popular sports are Athletics, Football (Soccer), Basketball, and Bocce.

>> Can new sports be added?

New sports can be added to a local Special Olympics Program at the discretion of program leadership.

There are many factors which might influence why and when a Program will introduce a new sport. These can include:

- Interest from athletes
- Availability of facilities
- Availability of experienced coaches
- Cost of running the sport
- Potential opportunities to compete.

TIP

Some sports require pre-approval from Special Olympics International under Sports Rules Article 1 (section 5.3). These include combat sports, martial arts (except Judo), motor sports, sledding sports, aerial sports, shooting or archery. Your State or National Special Olympics Program can advise you on their local processes.

>> Motor Activity Training Program

The Motor Activity Training Program (**MATP®**) is our Special Olympics movement-based sensory sports program for athletes with severe or profound disabilities and complex support needs. MATP® enables our athletes with the highest support needs to participate and compete in meaningful sports specific activities within Special Olympics. We ensure that these sports specific activities are appropriate to their needs, interests, and motivations.

4. Special Olympics Competitions

>> Why is competition important?

Competition is an essential component of a Special Olympics Sport program. **Athletes train to compete**.

Competition gives athletes a chance to:

- Meet new friends and have fun!
- Showcase their abilities.
- Challenge themselves to achieve a personal best.
- Experience the joy and excitement of competition.
- Measure their progress.
- Be part of a large community event

When do Special Olympics competitions happen?

Local Level

Each Special Olympics program offers its own competition calendar. This may include annual competitions, local community leagues, national or state seasonal competitions. You should contact your local Special Olympics program or visit their website to learn more about what is coming up.

Regional Level

Each Special Olympics Region may host a variety of Regional Level competitions and events.

International Level

Hosted every 2 years, alternating between summer and winter, the World Games have become the flagship event of the Special Olympics movement and have grown to be an international demonstration of inclusion, acceptance, and unity. In addition to these, Special Olympics also offers other single sport international events.

Divisioning

Divisioning is the process Special Olympics uses to ensure every athlete and team has the chance to compete against other athletes and teams of similar ability. This is how Special Olympics ensures competition is fair and equal.

We use 3 criteria to division athletes and teams for competition:

- Gender
- Age
- Ability level.

This means that an athlete will compete with other athletes of the same gender, age and similar (not necessarily equal) ability level. Divisioning aims to have a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 8 athletes in each division.

It is important to remember that divisioning is not a perfect science. There will always be stronger competitors in every competition, inside and outside of Special Olympics. Divisioning aims to objectively group athletes and teams by these criteria, however, the Special Olympics rules allow flexibility to encourage a safe, quality and dignified competition.

This means that you may sometimes see:

- Athletes of two genders competing in the same event.
- Athletes of different ages competing in the same event.

Typically, this will only be done when quality competition cannot be provided within the same age/gender. Special Olympics is based on competition. Our rules embrace the spirit of competition and prioritize the opportunity to compete for our athletes.

To learn more about divisioning, **visit** this link: https://tinyurl.com/39ffv2mp

Or **scan** the QR code:

5. Competition Seasons and Advancement

A competition cycle describes a series of competition opportunities Special Olympics athletes can progress through, during a given period. A competition cycle can vary from program to program. Usually, a competition cycle can operate on a 4-year term directly after a World Games. The number of levels of competition in a cycle can vary from program to program. Starting at a local competition, athletes can progress to State or National level competitions. From there, they may have the opportunity to compete at a World Games or other international competitions.

This is an example of how a competition cycle might operate:

Within some Special Olympics Regions, Regional competitions are also offered. These may be multi-sport competitions or single sport competitions. Advancement to Regional competitions will often be determined by where in a competition cycle the event falls.

Eligibility for Advancement

Before an athlete can be eligible to advance to the next level of competition, they must fulfil the basic eligibility requirements that are listed in Sports Rules Article 1.

To be eligible, an athlete:

- Has received proper training in their sport, in preparation for the competition.
- Has competed in the previous highest level of competition. In the graphic above, this means that any athlete who competed and placed in Local Regional Competition, would meet this eligibility requirement for State or National Competition.
- Has not been disqualified or failed to complete their event (i.e. a DQ or DNF/DNS – did not finish/did not start – means the athlete is ineligible to advance)
- The sport and event they competed in at the previous level, must be offered.

  Example:
  If an athlete wins a gold medal in 800m Freestyle in Local Regional Competition, but the 800M Freestyle is not offered at State or National Competition, then the athlete is not eligible through this event. If the athlete has a second event which IS offered, they will still be eligible through that event.
- In order to advance to higher levels of competition, initial priority is given to first-place finishers from all divisions of the specific sport and event in consideration. If the number of eligible athletes and or teams exceeds the quota, athletes and teams are selected by random draw.

Making Selections

Athletes are selected to advance from one competition to the next through a process called "Random Selection".

For each competition, the competition organizers will determine a "quota". The quota is the number of athletes that can be accommodated at competition.

In some competitions, the quota will be established by event or discipline.

The Random Selection Process

The primary principle of the random selection process is that priority is given to gold medallists (of all ability levels), progressing through finishing places until the quota is filled or eligible athletes are exhausted. When the quota is determined, there are 3 possible scenarios.

Scenario One

The quota is exactly equal to the number of eligible athletes who earned a gold medal at the previous highest competition.	Example: The quota for the Local/Regional Badminton competition is 10 athletes. There are exactly 10 Gold Medallists from the Local Community Badminton competition. Outcome: All gold medallists advance.

Scenario Two

The quota is greater than the number of eligible athletes who earned a gold medal at the previous highest competition.	Example: The quota for the State or National Bocce competition is 30 athletes. There are 20 Gold Medallists from the Local Regional Bocce competition. Outcome: Step 1: All 20 Gold Medallist automatically advance. There are now 10 remaining quota places. Step 2: We now move to silver medallists. There are 15 Silver medallists who meet the eligibility requirements (as explained above). We now randomly select 10 of these 15 silver medallists to advance to the next level.

NOTE: An important principle here is that when we select the 10 silver medallists – they are randomly chosen from the eligible athletes. Priority is not given to more skilled or higher performing athletes. Each silver medallist, regardless of their ability, must be afforded an equal chance to be selected to advance.

Scenario Three

The quota is less than the total number of eligible athletes who earned a gold medal at the previous highest level of competition.	Example: There are 10 women's basketball teams who won a gold medal at the State or National Games Basketball Competition. A quota of 2 Women's basketball teams has been allocated to the program for the Special Olympics World Games Basketball competition. Outcome: Two teams are randomly selected from the 10 eligible teams (per the eligibility criteria above). The two selected team advance to the Special Olympics World Games.

NOTE: It is important to note that as the teams are randomly selected, the gold medal winning teams that progress may come from any division. Programmes must ensure that the highest and lowest ability teams in their competition have an equal opportunity to progress.

6. Awards

Does everyone get a medal?

No! We often hear people say that everyone gets a medal in Special Olympics. This is not the case. **Special Olympics Sports Rules Article 1** governs how athletes are awarded for their competition performances. Every athlete in a Special Olympics IS awarded for their performance (unless they have been disqualified for unsportsmanlike conduct).

What award are usually given?

- Athletes/Teams who finish in first, second or third place are awarded medals – Gold, Silver, and Bronze, as traditionally awarded in sport.
- Athletes/Teams who finish in 4th through 8th place receive a place ribbon, recognizing their order of finish.
- Athletes who do not finish their event, or who are disqualified for a technical infringement or a maximum effort violation, will receive a Participation ribbon, which celebrates their effort and participation in the event.
- Athletes who participate in a Motor Activity Training Program Challenge event will receive an MATP Challenge Award (this may be a ribbon or a medal, at the discretion of the competition management).

Is there ever a time my athlete will not get an award?

An athlete who is disqualified for unsportsmanlike conduct will not receive an award.

What is maximum effort? And what happens if this principle is violated?

The maximum effort rule was introduced to maintain the integrity of the competition. It aims to prevent athletes from deliberately under performing in earlier rounds of competition, to secure a more favorable division, where they believe they have a higher chance of securing a medal.

Maximum Effort is applied differently in each sport. This is described in the sport specific rules. Typically, in timed and measured sports, a 15% performance range is permitted. This means that an athlete who performs 15% better than their entry/divisioning time may be subject to disqualification.

Although this sounds harsh, for an athlete who runs 400m in 4 mins 20 seconds – they would need to run 3 mins 41 seconds to violate this rule. It is therefore vitally important that coaches are keeping regular training records for their athletes and ensuring that their entry time for competition is reflective of their personal best performance.

In other sports, technical officials will observe athlete/team performances and may impose sanctions if the MER is being violated. Each sport has regulations around this.

It is important to note that the 15% benchmark is a recommendation. Competition management may adjust this % for some or all events, depending on a variety of factors including environment, weather, facilities, and ability level of the athletes.

7. Unified Sports

What is Unified Sports? And what is traditional sport?

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is an inclusive sports program that combines an approximately equal number of Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) on teams for training and competition. Unified Sports is based on the principle that training and playing sport together is a quick path to friendship and a step towards inclusion.

I've heard people talk about "Traditional Sports" – what is that?

In Special Olympics, "traditional" sport, refers to competitions and events that are solely open to athletes with intellectual disabilities. These events will often be offered alongside Unified Sports events at the same competition. Unified Teams will compete against other Unified teams, whilst Traditional teams, will compete against traditional teams.

Is all Unified Sports the same?

No. Special Olympics offers three different "models" of Unified sports. Coaches and their athletes will determine the most suitable Unified Sports model for their team. The three models are known as:

- Recreation Model
- Player Development Model
- Competitive Model

You can watch this video for an explanation about what these 3 models are.

What is so special about Unified Sports?

Unified Sport is based on the "Principle of Meaningful Involvement". The principle of meaningful involvement (POMI) is not a rule, but a philosophy. The principle of meaningful involvement means that each player on a team (or in a pair) should have the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the team's performance based on their individual abilities, skills, and interests. POMI recognizes that teams have players with a range of ability levels. Everyone cannot and does not play the SAME role, but each player should have the chance to make a valuable contribution to their team's performance.

8. Fitness

Fitness

Physical fitness is a key part of the Special Olympics mission. Fitness is the state of optimal health and performance through adequate physical activity, nutrition, and hydration. For our athletes to be fit, they must practice healthy habits year-round and lifelong.

Fitness Captains

Fitness Captains is an Athlete Leadership role on a sports team. This person leads their team in activities related to fitness and healthy lifestyle, such as dynamic warm-up and cool-downs and sharing Health Tips.

Performance Stations

These stations are provided at competitions on/near the field of play to enhance athlete preparation and recovery, connect fitness to sport performance, and encourage year-round engagement in healthy lifestyle.

9. Family Involvement with Special Olympics Sport

Special Olympics sport is run largely by volunteers in local communities. Whether Special Olympics sport programs take place in schools, sports clubs, or other organisations, they will often require volunteers to support and sustain the programme.

There are lots of different ways you can get involved as a volunteer!

Be a Dedicated Fan

Sometimes, as a family member, you just want to be able to be a fan in the stand and support your son, daughter, or sibling. Family support is a very important factor in keeping athletes involved in sport.

Your support might be as simple as:

- Ensuring they have transportation to and from training.
- Ensuring they have healthy snacks and liquids to keep their energy levels high.
- Supporting healthy eating habits at home – a healthy athlete performs better in sport.
- Encouraging and supporting them through challenges – sometimes learning new skills is tough, encouraging your athlete to keep trying and celebrating their accomplishments.

If you have more time to give, you could volunteer with your local program. There are many different roles.

Become a Coach

Many family members become involved as coaches in Special Olympics. Each Special Olympics program offers coach education opportunities to help prepare you to become a coach. Whether you are already an experienced coach or teacher, or if you are new to coaching, there are opportunities and roles available for you to get involved. You should contact your local program to learn more about the education and requirements for coaches in your program.

To learn more about coaching, you can visit our coaching resource pages.

You can also visit our Online Learning Portal where you can take some short e-learning courses to learn more about being a coach in Special Olympics. It is free, quick, and easy to create an account and all of our coach education is free and available in multiple languages.

Special Olympics also offers a Coach Webinar Series each year, presented by our friends at Gallagher. You can view all of these webinars, led by inspirational athlete leaders, Special Olympics coaches, and experts from across the global coaching community here.

Sport specific Coaching Guides are also available for each major global sport. These guides provide coaches with some useful technical and tactical coaching resources to support them in their role. You can view these on each Sport Resource page, available here.

10. Navigating the Role of a Special Olympics Sports Family Member

Special Olympics sports family member:
A parent, caregiver, or sibling whose family member is involved in Special Olympics sports.

This role involves different responsibilities, behaviors, and attitudes aimed at supporting and nurturing the athlete's sports participation, development, and overall well-being. Being a sports family member involves adapting to your athlete's individual personality and supporting their journey in a way that nurtures their physical, emotional, and personal development.

1	**Supportive Attitude**	A sports parent should be encouraging and supportive of their athlete's participation in sports, regardless of the athlete's skill level or achievements. The focus should be on enjoying the experience, learning, and personal growth rather than solely on winning.
2	**Emotional Support**	Being there for your athlete emotionally is crucial. Whether they win or lose, showing that you're proud of their efforts and improvement is important for their self-esteem and motivation.
3	**Logistical Support**	Parents often play a key role in organizing and managing their athlete's sports commitments. This might involve arranging transportation, ensuring they have the necessary equipment, and managing scheduling conflicts.
4	**Attending Events**	Attending your athlete's games, matches, or competitions shows your interest and dedication to their pursuits. Your presence can have a positive impact on their confidence and performance.
5	**Respect for Coaches and Officials**	Demonstrating respect for coaches, officials, and other participants is essential. Avoid undermining coaches' decisions, even if you disagree, and show sportsmanship by adhering to rules and maintaining a cheerful outlook.
6	**Balancing Priorities**	Sports parents should help their athletes strike a balance between sports and other life commitments. Encouraging time management and open communication is important.
7	**Setting Realistic Expectations**	It's important to set realistic expectations for your athlete's performance and progress. Unrealistic pressure to excel can lead to stress and burnout
8	**Empowerment and Independence**	While support is vital, allowing your athlete to take ownership of their sports journey fosters independence, decision-making skills, and a stronger sense of accomplishment.

9	**Teaching Life Lessons**	Sports provide numerous opportunities to teach valuable life skills such as teamwork, discipline, resilience, and perseverance. Parents can reinforce these lessons by discussing experiences and challenges.
10	**Handling Setbacks**	Dealing with losses, setbacks, and failures is a natural part of sports. Sports parents should help their athletes process these experiences, learn from them, and use them as motivation to improve.
11	**Modeling Behavior**	As a family member, demonstrating good sportsmanship, respect for others, and a healthy approach to competition is essential.
12	**Open Communication**	Encourage your athlete to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to sports. Open communication helps build trust and understanding.

Sports Sibling Key Roles

1	**Cheerleader and Supporter**	Sports siblings often become the biggest fans of their athletic brother or sister. They attend games, matches, and competitions to show support and cheer for their siblings' team.
2	**Emotional Support**	Sports siblings can provide emotional support to their athlete sibling by being there to celebrate victories, console after losses, and offer encouragement during challenging times.
3	**Logistical Support**	Depending on their age and ability, sports siblings might assist with transportation, helping with equipment, or even participating in pre-game rituals that contribute to their sibling's routine.
4	**Sharing Experiences**	Sports can become a common ground for bonding. Sharing stories, experiences, and even practicing together can strengthen sibling relationships.
5	**Learning Life Skills**	Being a sports sibling offers the opportunity to learn important life skills such as empathy, teamwork, and the ability to celebrate others' achievements.
6	**Dealing with Rivalries**	Sibling rivalries in sports can be both fun and challenging. It's important to strike a balance between friendly competition and supporting each other.
7	**Managing Time**	If both siblings are involved in various activities, they may learn how to manage time effectively and respect each other's commitments.
8	**Building Connections**	Interacting with teammates, coaches, and other sports families can expand a sports sibling's social circle and create lasting connections.
9	**Showing Sportsmanship**	Being gracious in victory and supportive in defeat, even when not directly competing, demonstrates good sportsmanship to others.